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Fides et Ratio: An Opportunity

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The October 1998 publication of the papal encyclical *Fides et Ratio* provides an opportunity for philosophers and theologians to engage one another in vigorous and sustained conversation about the relationship between their respective disciplines especially in the context of contemporary culture. As a journal founded in the hope of providing a place for philosophers and theologians to learn from one another's work, *Philosophy & Theology* would like to encourage contributions that would take up the challenges presented to us by the encyclical. In the hope of stimulating such contributions, I would like to raise one issue that, in my judgment, needs to be addressed as an important part of a renewed conversation between philosophy and theology: the state of marginalization in which both disciplines seem to stand with respect to wider range of human culture at the start of the third millennium. To put matters bluntly, our inquiries-especially our philosophical ones-have, for the most part, become marginal to the main dynamics at work in shaping the human world as the twentieth century comes to a close.

A telling illustration of this marginalization was the report on the recent World Congress of Philosophy that appeared in *New York Times* of August 15, 1988. The report concerned a panel discussion, involving six of the more notable philosophers of our day (Appel, Davidson, Greene, Nasr, Quine, and Strawson), on the question "What have we learned from philosophy in the 20th century?" The headline given the story "Think-Tank: At the End of a Century of Philosophizing, the Answer Is: Don't Ask" is by itself sufficiently indicative of how peripheral philosophy has become in the perception of even serious and sober journalism. One excerpt is worth quoting:

The air fairly crackled with anticipation. Quick-witted Mr. Quine, a 90-year-old Harvard philosopher who is the premier 20th century proponent of naturalism, the view that philosophy is a part of science, went first. "I should have thought up an answer to that one," he said. "I'm going to have to pass." Everyone laughed, but he wasn't kidding. Indeed, all six philosophers seemed to be confused about whether they were supposed to give little speeches or take part in a roundtable discussion... Mr. Davidson, an 81-year-old philosopher at Berkeley who has written about the relationship between our identity as people and our existence as physical objects, dodged the question. So instead, he discussed how "very American" philosophy had been in the 20th century, and then reconsidered: "To be honest, it was mostly Harvard." Today, he said approvingly, it is more international. From there, he went on to talk about the merits of air travel and E-mail. The big three had refused to answer the question.

One factor that has brought about such marginalization is that we philosophers—and, to a lesser extent, we theologians—have come to understand ourselves principally as academic specialists who are expected (and who expect ourselves) to play a certain role in the educational institutions of our society. Those institutions, moreover, are themselves undergoing changes, in response to powerful forces in the wider culture—changes that are turning the dynamics of academic life more and more into that of the market place. We are turning into purveyors of knowledge, with our location in the academic market place more and more determined by the strategies and techniques we use to call attention to our particular "knowledge product" and to persuade our customers (or consumers) of its value to their needs and wants. (Of course, if we are really clever, we may even find ways

of creating new wants to make our product even more marketable. As philosophers do that, we are likely to find ourselves less and less like Socrates and more and more like the Sophists—who, we must not forget, were the first to make teaching philosophy a paid profession!)

If I am correct that philosophy and theology—at least as modes of academic discourse and practice—are becoming ever more marginal in the workings of a globalized culture, what bearing does the encyclical *Fides et Ratio* have upon this situation? Quite a bit, I suspect. However one may evaluate the picture the encyclical presents of the history and the current state of each discipline, it sees both philosophy and theology as rooted in an abiding disposition—indeed, an abiding hunger—of the human spirit for making sense of its condition as stretched between the finite and the infinite. The encyclical affirms a deeply rooted, ineluctable human need to have one's own life and the context(s) of one's life "make sense" in a definitive way. The encyclical affirms that there is a fundamental dimension of spirit to our human reality, and it is on the basis of a common recognition of the spiritual dimension of our humanity that philosophers and theologians can engage in fruitful dialogue with one another—and, more important, with the minds and hearts of our fellow human beings. In contrast, the dynamics at work in the contemporary marginalization of philosophy and theology would anesthetize us to the spiritual; they would have us put aside, without much regret, such a quest for final meaning—not in virtue of the theoretically articulated denial of classical atheism, nor with the protesting despair of nihilism—but with a shrug of unconcern as one tracks events in the global market place for their impact on one's own prospects. "Modernity," as Charles Taylor has so clearly pointed out, has made it possible to talk about ourselves and about the "world" without having to talk about God. "Post-modernity"—not so much in its intellectual forms, which still acknowledge the restlessness and yearnings of the human spirit, but in the form of practices which encourage us to talk of all that is, including ourselves, in the language of commodification and the market place—may be making possible something far more pernicious. It is making it possible for us to talk of who we are in language that speaks neither of soul nor of spirit—and not even to notice what we have thereby lost.

As forces gather to persuade all of us that the whole point of our existence is to take our place in-or might the better image here be "to elbow our way into"?-the hurly-burly of the global market place, is there going to be room for what are, after all, the main stock in trade of philosophers and theologians: words? For how could there be any real "market value" to our words-which, often times, are words about yet other words? Yet-and here is where I think the affirmations found in *Fides et Ratio* can serve as a crucial reference point engaging the challenge which contemporary culture presents to philosopher and theologian alike-words, language are the very "stuff" of our human being as *embodied spirit*. In a commodified world, poets, philosophers, and theologians are likely to be the among the few who practice crafts that are most essential for keeping us aware that words are more than instruments of power, that words are not mere words, nor the simply the sparkling play upon the surface of a reality that is, after all, only surface; it is poets, philosophers and theologians whose work will be needed to remind us that it is the utterance of words that enables us to give voice to spirit.